

Hyperreality and the dominance of the image in White Noise

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The pervasive culture of television watching is seen and we see that Babette tries to diminish its glamour by making it a family affair. However television's influence is seen steadily throughout the novel, from the way Denise mutters 'toyota celica' in her sleep to the way the family experiences a numbness to disasters because of their exposure to it on television. Along with the 'most photographed barn in America' Murray Siskind takes Jack Gladney to we see that signs and symbols have replaced reality and we are firmly in the realm of the simulacral where reality is effaced and we are left with hyperreality, mediated or augmented reality.

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That night, a Friday, we ordered Chinese Food and watched television together, the six of us. Babette had made it a rule. She seemed to think that if kids watched television one night a week with parents or stepparents, the effect would be to de-glamorize the medium in their eyes, make it wholesome domestic sport. (4.18)

The pervasive culture of television watching is thus seen in the above quote and we see that Babette tries to diminish its glamour by making it a family affair. However television's influence is seen steadily throughout the novel, from the way Denise mutters 'toyota celica' in her sleep to the way the family experiences a numbness to disasters because of their exposure to it on television. Along with the 'most photographed barn in America'

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Reality television explodes the division between the hyperreal and the real, but what it ultimately represents is the triumph of the hyperreal and the manufactured image. As Derrida argues, it is an 'artificiality' that is produced and made rather than a record. (Echographies of Television 41). It also serves to satisfy our thirst for voyeurism, invasion of privacy and as Baudrillard states, it increases our fascination with the obscene (Ecstasy of Communication 33). It is an exercise of 'desiring to be seen' and desiring the Other to return our gaze, as we desire the mock celebrity that reality television affords. In witnessing the privation of its participants, we are also simultaneously celebrating our comforts, so that there is a sadistic element to taking pleasure in watching the sufferings of others at work as well. In coming across as 'more real than real' and in our fascination with the hyperreal and manufactured image, Baudrillard's statement that we no longer watch television and it is television that watches us seems remarkably prophetic in the surge and success of reality television programmes (Ecstasy 31). Reality television appeals because of its 'live' element, its telepresence, and in Derrida's terms, the space it allows for the 'arrival' of an event, whose expectation is made of a 'nonexpectation,' in so doing it offers a certain variety, diversity and spontaneity that we cannot find in scripted television programmes. Derrida also argues for a 'messianism' that guides the event, the

promise of futurity, hence perhaps it is the open-ness and heightened anticipation that we take pleasure in (Echographies of Television 13). There is also an element of ‘testimony’ and truth to live television which separates it from scripted programmes. As it happens only once in live real time there is a precious singularity and uniqueness to the moment. Derrida once again explains that it captures the irreplaceable present and bears witness to the fact that “this was there” (Echographies of Television 94). One might also argue that the addressee enjoys its status of ‘being addressed’ in reality television, thus enabling the addressee to participate in production of meaning as the confessional scenes in reality as well as reporting in broadcast programmes are directed towards engaging the audience in a being ‘participants’ of an event. There exists an ineluctable ‘reality effect’ when the specters on television seem to be watching us (Derrida 123).

In the Ecstasy of Communication, Baudrillard once again reminds us that with the advent of television, as in hyperreality, the subject-object distinction collapses and we are immersed in its reality – “television becomes a control screen” (13). He uses the metaphor of driving to relate our relation to television- no longer controllers of a device, we are now subjected to its control, we become a “computer at the wheel”, not a “drunken demiurge of power” (13). He argues that television creates a space of hyperreality that overtakes reality and hence displaces metaphysics. Our subjectivities are dissolved- we are no longer ‘subjects of interiority’ (13) in control of television but subjected to the controls of multiple network satellites. Television becomes an intrusive actor in our domestic space- that overtakes our lives from work, consumption, play, social relations and leisure. Baudrillard further explains that the hyperreal displaces the real and renders it useless. Social relationships within the

home are destroyed. Reality is ‘minutuarized’- television replaces our desire for human relationships or ideals and renders organic and real bodies and events superfluous (Ecstasy 14). The obscene fascinates us, and replaces the organic with the machinic. In this regard, advertising also becomes an omnipresent reality – materializes its ‘obscurity’- monopolizes public life with its exhibition. This is also precisely what reality television shows are: Simulations and the triumph of the hyperreal and mediated reality.

The most intimate processes of our lives become feeding grounds for the media (the Louds on television – a family which was put under camera surveillance-also might draw a parallel to the current phenomenon of reality TV shows such as Big Brother, Survivor, Temptation Island, The Bachelor and so on). All aspects of life are permeated and infiltrated by the media, subjecting everything to visibility, exposing everything to the inexorable light of communication. In Baudrillard’s terms we live in the “ecstasy of communication”, which is obscene because it renders the private exposed, a pornography of information and communication.

It is the obscenity of the hidden that is suddenly overexposed and visible. In this dissolution of the exterior and the interior, Baudrillard likens the contemporary subject to the schizophrenic – who cannot distinguish between inner and outer and is subject to all the vagaries of the external world (Ecstasy of Communication 14). The subject’s sense of individuality and distinction from external objects is dissolved. He/she becomes obscene, as is the world. The subject is total prey of hyperreality, a pure screen, a switching center for all networks of influence. For Baudrillard, both the body and the ‘self’ (both conform to images) can be divided and commodified, as governed by the capitalist/advertising code (Ecstasy 42). To

see the 'self' as a technology possessed by the mediascape, as Baudrillard does, is to become schizophrenic. Baudrillard's subject is therefore, completely de-centred and dominated by the image.

Once you've seen the signs about the barn, it becomes impossible to see the barn." (3.19)

Again we see the reign of hyperreality the barn is replaced by its image, by the souvenirs and photographs that surround it, by the images that mediate it. Delillo thus argues hyperreality has replaced reality and we are firmly in the grip of hyperreality or augmented reality.

We're not here to capture an image, we're here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. Can you feel it, Jack? An accumulation of nameless energies." (3.21)

Walter Benjamin argued that photography reproduced the aura of a subject, its specificity in space and time. It essentializes the barn and perpetuates this specific space time image of the barn through replications. However it destroys the reality of the barn and replaces it with an image.

"I am the false character that follows the name around." (4.23)

Jack Gladney admits he is a fiction. He pioneered Hitler studies and dons sunglasses while using his initials J.A.K to perpetuate an image of a dangerous Hitler scholar indestructible and unafraid of mortality when the reality is he is profoundly afraid of death and mortality so much so he will shoot Babette's lover at the novels end to gain 'life-credit' for himself.

"It's going to rain tonight."

"It's raining now," I said.

"The radio said tonight." (6.3-6.5)

Again we are faced with the situation that mediated reality or hyperreality has replaced reality. Everybody believes it will rain because the radio said so and this reality has replaced the reality of physical rain.

"Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses." (6.9)

Jack rebuts hyperreality and says what needs to be said about the invasion of our lives by the media. Physical reality has been replaced by hyperreality or augmented reality and the television and radio are constant interjections and dominators in the lives of the Gladneys.

"Is there such a thing as now? "Now" comes and goes as soon as you say it. How can I say it's raining now if your so-called "now" becomes "then" as soon as I say it?" (6.22).

Heinrich cunningly says now becomes then as soon as you say it, in Derrida this is the trace, the mediated difference with a repetition that the sign produces, once something is said, it is repeated with a difference and becomes an image of what was originally said.

"You see the sun moving across the sky. But is the sun moving across the sky or is the earth turning?" (6.32)

Heinrich thus points out the importance of personal perspective colouring perception. The sun looks like it is moving across the sky but it is truly the earth spinning creating that optic illusion of the sun moving. Again we see mediated reality triumphs.

But this evacuation isn't simulated. It's real."

"We know that. But we thought we could use it as a model."

"A form of practice? Are you saying you saw a chance to use the real event in order to rehearse the simulation?" (21.396)

Simulation thus becomes reality as the SIMUVAC staff use a real event to rehearse a simulation. We thus see no difference between simulation and reality and are firmly in the realm of the simulacral.

"There must always be believers. Fools, idiots, those who hear voices, those who speak in tongues. We are your lunatics. We surrender our lives to make your nonbelief possible. You are sure you are right but you don't want everyone to think as you do." (40.150)

Atheists thus need believers paradoxically to pit their non belief against to make a sport of believers. Jack is shocked to find that the nuns do not believe in God. The nuns maintain they are there to maintain the illusion of belief. Again, we find simulacral belief.

Someone turned on the TV set at the end of the hall, and a woman's voice said: "If it breaks easily into pieces, it is called shale. When wet, it smells like clay." (7.28)

The omnipresence of television is thus seen in the above quote. We find we cannot escape hyperreality because television and radio is everywhere in the novel and replaced objective reality.

According to Derrida, we are in a state of quasi-illiteracy with respect to the image.

We must learn to discriminate, compose, paste and edit images to gain mastery over them. This is a skill which must be developed within and without schools. For Derrida this involves developing a new relation to the politics of memory. Derrida contends that any politics of memory would imply the intervention of the state – a state that legislates and acts with regard to nonfinite material to be stored (59). While today we can almost claim to archive everything, Derrida wonders if it is ultimately the state that decides what is worthy of preservation, and will always privilege the national and the public. If we were to delegate this responsibility of the politics of memory to a state institution, then it will be a minority or a fraction of the nation rather than “integral” or “general will” that preserves this memory. Although Derrida says that a politics of memory might exist, he also emphasizes that it is nevertheless necessary to educate citizens, subjects, or televisual audiences to be vigilant with regard to the politics of memory: to be alert that it was a particular politics, as well as essentially a politics. One must simultaneously practice and be critical of a politics of memory (Echographies of Television 63). In Derrida’s view this means developing an awareness of selectivity (63). Derrida argues that this awareness will never be a spectatorial critique, or a theoretical vigilance. To politicize these technical events alternatively and to democratize them, one must also be wary of politicization. Here, Derrida’s reading of developing a critical stance towards a politics of memory proves to be immensely liberating in light of Baudrillard and Virilio’s pessimistic assessments of the potential for agency with regards to television. This is the most optimistic reading of the three, developing a meta-awareness of a politics of memory in order to politicize it alternatively.

Works

cited:

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